

A NOTE ON THE FEEDING HABITS OF THE  
LITTLE BITTERN (*IXOBRYCHUS MINUTUS*).

BY

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(*With two plates*).

Round about fifteen years ago I had my first experience of watching and photographing the Little Bittern from the hide. The habits of this denizen of the reed beds are so extraordinary that the episodes I then witnessed have remained impressed most vividly upon my memory. It has consequently remained my fixed intention to complete the series of photographs I then obtained with a further series of the young in the nest. I wished above all to depict the extraordinary manner in which the food is passed to them by their parents.

Last summer I found myself at the end of June in a houseboat on the Dal Lake with four days of my leave to go, and a good number of plates still unexposed. In a little backwater off the Nagim Bagh amongst the floating gardens I spent a few delightful hours photographing the Whiskered Terns, and discovered just as I was about to move off that three yards behind the shikara from which I had been operating was a Little Bittern's nest with 6 tousled youngsters in it. All I had to do was to part a way through the reeds I had been anchored against and transfer the camera to the back of the hide. The chicks as usual were of very different ages and development, ten days probably separating the oldest from the youngest, for the eggs are generally deposited at 2-day intervals while incubation starts with the laying of the first one. I anticipated therefore that I might have some difficulty in obtaining the photographs I required, as I knew from past experience that the chicks become wanderers as soon as they are strong enough to clamber out of the nest, and I have on occasion found an entire household distributed throughout the reeds in a circle some yards out from their home as if each one had started out on an independent voyage of discovery. True, I had also noted that they seemed to be in the habit of recollecting at the nest at night, in stormy weather, and often on being disturbed.

On this occasion I had not been long in the hide before all beaks were turned expectantly in the same direction. The two largest young ones clambered a couple of feet from the nest and a moment later I caught a glimpse of the male parent who stalked deliberately and silently past as if he did not own it. The young ones gazed sorrowfully after him but soon returned to their usual practice of jostling one another and on occasions making vicious stabs at young brother or sister just to remind me what quarrelsome brats they always are. In a former paper I once remarked that I thought this aggressive spirit must be a special dispensation whereby the smallest youngster by sheer ferocity should be enabled to obtain a share of the food,

After a short lapse of time the male suddenly appeared on the edge of the nest where he stood rigidly to attention. He was evidently ill at ease, for he took no notice of the family at all and started clambering hand over hand up one of the stout supporting reeds on reaching the summit of which he flapped away uttering a single harsh croak as he did so. It is hardly correct to say he suddenly appeared at the nest for a Little Bittern seldom does anything suddenly. Rather do they fade in or out of the picture, as their movements are always so deliberate, solemn, and silent: except, that is, for the lightning dart of the bill at an unwary dragonfly or a silvery sprat required for the offsprings repast. The young ones too are as silent as their parents, their bills opening and shutting when asking for food without the noisy infantile chorus of most young birds.

The two wanderers had immediately come home on the arrival of the male, and there they remained until he at last made up his mind to come and feed them. There then ensued those incidents I had witnessed so often before, but which so interested me that in watching every phase of the routine I had always failed to record them. On arrival on the nest, for a space he remained with bill horizontal; he then lowered it. This was the signal for an immediate attack upon his person by his seemingly ravenous horde. One of them seized his beak about halfway down but with a twist he freed himself. This, however, availed him nothing for the largest of the brood fastened on to him close to the base of the bill and there ensued a wrestling bout in the midst of which I took the accompanying photograph at a moment when his head was twisted right over but with no signs of his being able to break the aggressor's hold. Upon this the other five at once ceased to participate in the struggle and subsided into an attitude of anticipation with all eyes upon father. A moment later the latter forced his head down, his bill opening somewhat. A couple of heaves and there fell therefrom the semi-digested remnants, black in colour, of the regurgitated food for the brood. So broken up was it that on this occasion it was quite impossible to recognize its origin. It looked not unlike lumps, variable in size and crumbly in texture, of bazaar tobacco, and I was inclined towards the opinion that it was a jumble of insect remains. The main point of interest however is what happened to it. I have seen the young one in possession slide its own beak down that of its parent so that it was able to grab the food before it fell to the lot of one of its brethren. On this day however on all three occasions on which I witnessed the feeding process, not once did success crown the efforts of the bill-seizer, whereas the smallest member of the family was able to snatch up a sufficiency of fallen morsels for his needs. If the bill-seizer was generally successful in his attempts, one could readily understand the evolution of this curious habit. But a theory to fit in with its formation where the aggressor is more often than not quite unbenefited by his efforts, eludes me. Nature does not strike one as being philanthropic, so a habit on the part of the strongest which helps the weakest does not seem to fit in anywhere. Of course, a few intermittent observations from the hide at widely



Feeding habits of the Little Bittern.

*Photo by author.*

*Ixobrychus minutus* (Linn.)